

# Appraising Cameroon Students Communicative Competence in English

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**Abstract:** Despite the adoption of the competency-based approach and the establishment in Cameroon of the teaching of English right from primary schools some twenty years ago, communicating in English is still a difficult task among French-speaking students. The present survey shows that, out of seventy-two students cumulating at least nine years of English studies, only three were able to prove themselves competent in an elementary communication situation that required them to introduce themselves by correctly forming five sentences indicating the following: name, age, date and place of birth, number of years they had been studying English. It seems therefore, that the teaching of communicative English may not have been effective in the Cameroon education system whose lack of internal efficiency is also confirmed.

**Keywords:** Cameroon Students, Competency-based approach, communicative approach, communicative competence, English, metalanguage.

## I. INTRODUCTION

### A. Context

The State of Cameroon has been facing a major cultural challenge: rooting French-speaking youth in the local culture by building their communication skills in local languages threatened with extinction, then opening them up to the world by developing their communication skills in English, one of the two official languages of the country. Thus in 2003, the government through the Minister of National Education made the teaching of English compulsory throughout the primary cycle and established a national bilingualism week. Next, at the start of the 2008/2009 school year, the government instituted the teaching of national languages at the secondary cycle and opened a Department of Cameroonian languages and cultures at the Higher Teacher Training College of the University of Yaoundé 1. Then Cameroon education system adopted a new curricular paradigm, the Competency-based Approach (CBA), which seeks to make use of subjects' contents as resources for the adequate treatment of life situations, as pointed out by [11] and [9]. Language teaching would therefore, be about giving students the necessary grammatical and notional resources that could enable students to communicate properly in real-life situations. However, it appears that instead of learning to communicate in English, students have been learning to talk about English, that is, metalinguistic competence.

Actually, languages are used for communication, that is, talking to one another about the world. [1] shows that,

through an individual act of use, the speaker uses language, like an instrument, in expressing their relationship to the world. But most language classes are interested in talking about language. [4] explains that when a speaker uses the language not to speak of the world, but to speak of language, making it a topic of study or discourse, this is called a metalinguistic activity. This ancillary function of language is unfortunately what the English class in Cameroon is doing: instead of learning to talk about the world, students learn to talk about grammar and linguistics: parts of speech, verbs, adverbs, syntax or clauses. Metalanguage actually builds proficiency in talking about language not about the world. However, communicative approaches in language teaching have been advocating, since the 1970s, a teaching of languages devoid of any metalinguistic activity, just like most people acquire proficiency in their mother tongue without any recourse to metalanguage, like [10] shows.

### B. Objective and Statement of Problem: English Communication in a system lacking internal efficiency

The objective of this study is to report on the outcome of government measures regarding the development of communication competence in English among French-speaking students in Cameroon.

This study questions the implementation of the CBA and the generalisation of the teaching of English to French Speaking students, as from Form 1 at Primary school to Upper Sixth at High school level, some twenty years ago, against the background of a teaching system lacking internal efficiency. Actually, the above mentioned reforms took place against the background of chronic difficulty of the country education system to transform lessons into learning, to reduce the gap between the expected performances and the actual performances of students. This lack of internal efficiency is particularly characteristic of the French-speaking sub-system. According to [17], out of 1,000 pupils who enter the first year of primary education, 90 enter the second cycle of secondary education, 52 reach the end of the cycle and 11 enter university. Some twenty years after generalising the teaching of English in a country whose educational system displays such a low internal efficiency, one may begin to wonder whether the objective of getting French-speaking students to communicate in English had ever been attained.

From mere observation, students appear to have lost hope in the capacity of the education system to help them

build their communication skills in English. When asked about their poor communicative performance at English, they answer in French: "L'anglais, c'est Dieu qui donne", word for word, "English, is a gift of God". In other words, communicating in English is supernatural; only God can give the capacity to perform such a miracle. This testimony suggests to a certain extent a failure of the teaching system.

Have these decisions actually enabled French-speaking students to improve on their communication skills in English, the second official of the country? This study examines a double hypothesis : the study argues that, on the one hand, the generalization of the teaching of English at the primary school level and the adoption of the CBA have not improved the communication skills of French-speaking students ; on the other hand, the education system seems to have remained ineffective in transforming teaching into learning, reducing the gap between the expected performance and the actual performance of students in terms of communication in real-life situations in the English language.

## II. METHODOLOGY

### A. Population

To verify these hypotheses, we conducted a survey at the University of Yaoundé I. Founded in 1961 as the Institute of University Studies, this University became the Federal University of Cameroon in 1973 and was the only State University in the country, together with the Faculty of Protestant theology. The Federal University later split in two universities in 1993: the University of Yaounde I which stayed at the Yaounde campus with the faculties of arts, medicine, science and education, while the University of Yaounde 2, comprising the faculties of law and economics, was established in the neighbouring town of Soa, capital city of the Mefou and Afamba Division, in the outskirts of Yaounde, the capital city of Cameroon.

The sample population of this study came from the Faculty of Education, one the four faculties of the University of Yaounde I. Actually, the faculty of education welcomes graduates from the faculties of arts and science who are interested in education and teaching. The students who took part in this investigation, in December 2021, were first-year Master's degree students, at the Department of subjects didactics. They were 72 students, aged 18 to 49, holders of bachelor degrees issued by the University of Yaoundé I in as many subjects as physics, chemistry, biology, mathematics, geography, history, philosophy, French, Spanish and German. The students confessed they had been studying English for a period ranging from 9 to 20 years, which meant that they actually represented a sample of the population of students that witnessed the reforms. It should be underscored that in Cameroon, primary school covers six years, high school lasts for seven years and it takes three years to obtain a bachelor's degree at the University, which is an average of sixteen years of English studies on the whole.

### B. Process

The investigation consisted of subjecting this group of students to a test measuring their communication skills. The test focused on an elementary communicative situation: introductions. The notions required by the communication situation were numerals (age, date), nouns (place of birth), and the description of actions started in the past and going on in the present. The grammar required here was equally elementary: the verb "to be" conjugated in the present simple tense to give age, e.g. "I am 35"; The same verb conjugated in the past simple tense to express one's date of birth : "I was born". There was also the use of another present tense, the present perfect, to describe actions started in the past and continuing in the present. This tense requires the proper use of "since" and "for", the first indicating a precise moment, a date in the past, and the second, a duration. Another grammar point to be observed was the use of the prepositions "on" and "in" to indicate the date and the city respectively: "on 12th April 1999 in Yaounde", for example.

The choice of this elementary communicative situation and grammar was based on the assumption that university graduates, who have studied English for at least nine years, must have learned to communicate in English in such a situation. In all, it was assumed that nine years of English were enough to introduce oneself correctly, giving their name, age, date and place of birth and saying how long they have learned English. This communication situation was therefore considered within the reach of 72 graduate students who had learned to communicate in English from primary school within the framework of the CBA. Technically, the survey consisted of an instruction in French asking students to provide the following information by forming correct sentences in English: name, age, date of birth, place of birth, how long they had studied English. The communication situations covered by the survey and the performance measurement could be summarized in Table 1 as follows:

Table 1. Communication Situation And Expected Performance

Introducing oneself	Expected performance	Score
Say my name	<i>My name is + name</i>	1 point
Say my age	<i>I am + years</i>	1 point
Say my date of birth	<i>I was born + on + date</i>	1 point
Say my place of birth	<i>I was born + in + town or village</i>	1 point
Say how long I have studied English	<i>I + have studied/ have been studying + for + duration/ since + point in time</i>	1 point
Total		5 points

The survey was carried out in two stages: a pre-test and a post-test. The aim of the pre-test was to verify the first hypothesis: the teaching of English right from primary school level and the adoption of the CBA have not improved the communication skills of French-speaking students. After the pre-test, a correction session took place that exposed the students to the correct performance expected from them in

such a communication situation. The purpose of the post-test is to confirm the second hypothesis: Cameroon education system seems to have remained ineffective in transforming teaching into learning, especially in reducing the gap between the expected performance and the actual performance of students as concerns communicating in the English in real-life situations.

### III. FINDINGS

The results of the pre-test could be analysed from two points of view, quantitatively and qualitatively. From a quantitative point of view, out of the seventy-two students only three were able to perform correctly, scoring five over five points :

Table II. Pre-Test Results

Performance	Number of Students	%	English Studies
Scored 5/5	03	04.16	9-20 years
Less than 5/5	69	95.84	9-20 years
Total	72	100	9-20 years

As shown in the above table, those three students represented 4.16 % of the group. In other words, over 95 % of the students have yet to learn how to introduce themselves correctly. Despite nine to fifty years of English studies, 95.84 % are not able to introduce themselves correctly by giving their name, age, date and place of birth and how long they have been learning English.

From a qualitative point of view, the results show that most students can conjugate the verbs "to be" in the present simple and past simple but would not use them properly in an elementary situation like giving their age and their date of birth. They say: "I have 19 years", which is a word for word translation from the French "j'ai 19 ans". Another common mistake is "I am born" instead of "I was born". Again, this is an interference with French and a sign that they know some verbs that they can even conjugate, but they ignore their use in a given communicative situation. The same remark could be made as concerns the use of the prepositions "at" and "in" associated a town or specific place. Some students would say "at Paris", which sounds French, "à Paris". Actually, the correct sentence should be "I was born in Paris, at the American Hospital", for example, which means that "at" is certainly a preposition of place or position but not to be used with a town. And this should be underscored in a communicative lesson. In all, introductions was a communication situation that could be regarded as elementary and therefore within the reach of students who had been learning to communicate in English for at least 9 years. Thus, the students could communicate in English but not quite well.

A debrief was made for one hour, indicating the expected performance for each communication situation. Following this exercise, the baseline test was administered a second time and yielded the following results:

Table III. Post-Test Results

Performance	Number of Students	Rate
Scored 5/5	35	46.6 %
Less than 5/5	37	53.4 %
Total	72	100

In one hour of exposure to the expected performance, the progress made was spectacular: from three good answers, the group moved from three to thirty-five correct answers. In relative terms, the students who obtained 5/5 points went from 04.16 to 46.6 %, that is to say an increase of 42.5 %, which is a significant quantitative and qualitative progress, just within an hour. This figure represents the proportion of students capable of learning immediately, right from the first exposure to new knowledge. In other words, the post-test would have reached about 100 % progress if, beyond this introductory exposure, we had added consolidation exercises to give the slower learners the opportunity to grab. Clearly, if nearly half of the class is able to acquire within an hour a communicative competence that had not been developed in 9 to 20 years of learning, it is quite probable that they had never really had the opportunity to learn to communicate. So what has happened? Why is it that barely 5 % of students can build accurate sentences in an elementary communication situation, after twenty years of generalised English teaching and practice of the CBA?

### IV. DISCUSSION

#### A. Linguistic and communicative competences

Some studies, like [4], argue that language competence is essentially linguistic and consists of knowledge of the grammar rules of a language. According to [4], the founder of generative grammar, language competence is linguistic in essence and is understood as the aptitude to produce and understand an unlimited number of sentences never met before. [13] goes further to explain this point. This purely linguistic competence takes into account only the speaker's ability to produce and decode sentences correctly, therefore reducing language competence to the mastery of the phonological, spelling, syntactic and semantic rules that govern the language system. Actually, [4] opposed competence, as knowledge of language, to performance, its effective use. This opposition recalls the language-speech distinction developed by [15]. The latter argued that the sole and true subject of linguistics was language as opposed to speech or discourse.

On the contrary, [8] introduced the concept of communicative competence understood as the ability to use grammatical competence in a variety of communication situations, thus bringing a sociolinguistic perspective to the purely linguistic competence of [4] considered insufficient for understanding and producing statements in situations. Language competence therefore requires more than just linguistic knowledge, and should require, for example,

knowledge of the rules that govern "what can and must be said" from a social or ideological position, or the mastery of the constraints that determine the production of an unlimited set of statements, from a certain social or ideological standpoint, as pointed out by [5], [6] and [12]. From this perspective, communication competence is described as a mixture of knowledge and skills necessary for communication, like [2] and [3] show. This knowledge relates to three things: grammar, the rules for using language to communicate in society, the way of combining statements and functions of communication while respecting the principles of speech. In other words, language competence cannot be limited to linguistic competence alone but must be extended to the knowledge of the world.

### B. Communicative language teaching

Despite the adoption of the CBA, communicative competence may not have been properly taught in the language class all this while. Actually, in the light of the literature above, the language lesson for communicative purposes should take into account three parameters identified by [18]: grammatical, situational and notional. The first relates to linguistic competence while the other two parameters relate to communication competence. Indeed, the course first searches for grammatical and notional items or resources necessary for the adequate treatment of a communication situation. These notions could be divided up into such categories as time, quantity, space or even communication functions like judgement, evaluation, persuasion, argument, expression of emotions, etc. The CBA is concerned here with transferring the capacity to achieve a communicative action in a social situation, making an appropriate use of grammatical and notional resources, as pointed out by [7].

### V. CONCLUSION

In the final analysis, it appears that Cameroon students can actually communicate but not quite well in elementary social situations, despite the the adoption of the CBA and the governmental decision to have English taught from the cradle. As a matter of consequence, the lack of internal efficiency of Cameroon education system is confirmed. It is also quite probable that the education system is more concerned with linguistic and metalinguistic competences. Maybe students have learned more about how to conjugate the verb "to be" in the present and the past simple tenses, than how to use the verb in order to give their age (I *am* 20) or date of birth (I *was* born on). At this juncture, we

begin to wonder if the emergence of Cameroon would be achieved through education. As a matter of fact, Cameroon would like to achieve industrial and economic emergence by 2035. But industrial and economic development entails acculturation to the know-how of developed nations. One of the strengths of emerging nations is their high performance in acquiring new knowledge and know-how. However, this survey confirms that the performance of the school system in Cameroon in terms of acculturation remains quite low. It is therefore advisable to consider improving on the internal efficiency of the school system.

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